

Visiting Olin College

Olin College is that rarest of breeds: a new one. “I didn’t realize people were still starting colleges,” I heard someone say when they first heard about it. The Franklin W. Olin Foundation, after funding engineering buildings on lots of college campuses, finally decided to try to build a whole school itself, eventually putting all of its money (an estimated \$400 million) into Olin College and dissolving itself.

The college is not shy about spending the money. Every Olin student gets completely free tuition and a laptop full of engineering software. It has a big beautiful campus on the outskirts of Boston with three huge classroom buildings and six wings of dorms; each student gets a state-of-the-art dorm room.

The buildings are big and imposing. I first visited several years ago over the summer, back when Olin was just starting and no one was around. It was odd walking through the large, newly-built buildings all alone. I tried to imagine what it would be like when class was in session.

And here I am, years later, as I head to my first class. A kind and eager student, who I’ll call Lex, picked me up at the T stop and drove me to the campus and is now delivering me to the Computer Architecture course, which everyone insists is one of the best-taught on campus (by which, they apparently mean that the teacher is really funny). As we walk through the hallways at 9am I again don’t see a single other person. “Guess nobody wakes up this early,” I say.

Lex hands me off to a student in the Computer Architecture class who looks exactly like I imagined: long beard, geeky shirt, started several open source projects. He takes me into class — which, despite Olin’s reasonable gender balance in the student population as a whole, remains mostly male — where students are gabbing about things they’ve built with op-amps and breadboards before things start. While I’ve heard of breadboards, I’ve never seen one, let alone played with one before class, and I have to admit I’m not sure what an op-amp is. *Wow*, I think, *these kids are smart*.

Nobody here knows who I am — an odd experience for me, since lately I’ve only been hanging out with friends or going to conferences where people know of me. When they ask, I simply say I’m from Cambridge — a programmer at a startup if they push, but few do. Everybody just assumes I’m a prospective student visiting and looks down on me accordingly. I just try to keep quiet.

The class itself is taken up by having students do exercises on the whiteboards and then share their results with the class. Students here seem a little less embarrassed about getting things wrong in front of everyone; they’re happy to describe what they did from their seats. After everyone has shared, the class ends, and I leave, disappointed.

It’s still early, so Lex decides to take me on a tour of the facilities. Olin College was designed by and for engineers, the idea being that students who complete the program will have a full, rounded education in engineering. So there are classes in math and physics and basic principles of engineering, all unified into a project-based integrated courseblock or something like that. Then there are classes in materials science and biological science, classes in human factors and understanding the requirements of actual users, classes in building stuff and classes in using it.

There are lots of toys all over, great food, and an administration which is always asking how they can improve things further. The place reminds me of nothing so much as Google, which even has a similar kind of campus. I suppose it makes sense: this is what happens when you have engineers build an institution.

I grab some pasta for lunch (like at Google, the food isn’t really my style) and follow Lex to a table. Unlike at other schools, Lex explains, kids here don’t sit in cliques. Everybody knows everybody else, so the tables just fill up in order. We sit across from two kids who somehow turn the conversation from Dean Kamen’s ego to mobius strips, before telling us about a paper they’d written proving that a certain kind of graph of odd n can be reformulated on a mobius strip as a series of pentagons, showing us how by drawing on a napkin. (There are boxes of napkins on the tables, I notice, but not boxes of pens. Pay attention, institution builders!) The work seems quite impressive; I wonder if it could be published in an actual journal.

The kids also gab about student life. So-and-so is having a birthday and they’re going to get a keg later to celebrate. Everybody laughs and then they assure me that it’s only a root beer keg. Then they’re going to get a bunch of ice cream too, so it’ll be a huge root beer float. After lunch, I head out with them to downtown Boston to grab the keg and head back, a process that takes up most of the afternoon.

On the way back we stop at a music store. Bored, I pull out my Sidekick and check my email, which draws a store employee’s attention. Long-haired and with a weathered face in a tight black shirt, he speaks in a rocker’s drawl. “Whooooaaa, what is thaaaaat?” he says and I quietly explain. He tells us how he thinks computers will eventually be replaced by miniature devices, which will be able to communicate with each other by bouncing satellite signals off the moon. “Or the sun,” he adds.

To distract him, I think of saying that my companions are just the geniuses to build such a thing, but they save me the trouble. “Are you guys at MIT?” he asks. “No,” they say, and I realize Olin has a ways to go before its brand catches up with its curriculum. He says he has a friend who’s an expert in seeing the big picture and offers to hook the guys up so they can take on the small device manufacturers. (The Olin students immediately begin thinking about the tools they’d need to build small devices.) He takes down their names and emails before we head back.

“You have to recognize that everyone has a point of view about technology,” one Olin student says thoughtfully. “They taught us that on the designing-for-humans course.” “And even if he is crazy,” the other adds, “his friend might be cool.”

When we get back, I beg off from my guide Lex, saying I’d like to just tour the place for myself for a bit. Lex and her circle remind me a little of Olin cultists — whenever I ask about Olin their eyes go wide and they tell me that it’s the greatest place ever. Perhaps that’s true, I think, but I want to see for myself.

As I walk around the campus in the middle of the afternoon, I notice it’s still empty. As far as I can tell, the campus never fills out much more. It turns out 300 people don’t really fill up a large campus (they barely fill up a large auditorium) which means the whole place feels like a ghost town. The immaculately cleaned, yet mysteriously empty buildings everywhere make just walking around feel creepy and lonely.

I catch up with an old friend of mine, who I’ll call Rob, who ended up going to Olin. Rob is deeply cynical about the place and we head to the campus of Babson College (a leading business school which is literally located across the sidewalk from Olin) to dish. The Babson campus, although designed by the same hideous architect, feels like a breath of fresh air after Olin’s imposing emptiness. For one thing, there are students everywhere — Babson is over ten times the size of Olin. For another, the place is filled with trees, making the whole thing feel smaller and cozier. I don’t recall a single tree on the Olin campus, for whatever reason.

The mistake everyone makes, Rob explains, is that they think Olin is a school for *hackers*. This isn't unreasonable, since in the computer industry, hackers are often formally called engineers. But Olin is using engineer in its traditional sense, as people who just generally build stuff. Computer hacking makes up just a tiny part of the curriculum and an even smaller part of the culture. And so computer geeks who end up attending Olin just end up feeling left out. Rob is even thinking of taking programming classes at Babson.

Plus, things aren't as friendly as they seem. At orientation they were big on insisting Olin was a "feedback culture" — complete with role-playing exercises about how to properly give feedback (which Rob failed; he insists they claimed his invitation to lunch was "too negative") — but apparently they don't actually listen to the feedback much. The kids sitting near Rob at the dinner table all agree. One even pulls out a card they gave him with tips on the proper way to give feedback. (When I ask her later, Lex insists that every new batch of students has its own culture. And this one, she says, enjoys "shaking things up" while hers enjoys stabilizing them.)

Despite Olin's claims to be "working with" students, Rob insists that the place feels a lot more like "doing to". Instead of having rules, for example, they have a loose honor code with provisions like "respect for others". But "respect for others" apparently turns out to mean "respect for authority" in practice — a student who ran their own WiFi base station even after the campus IT department asked for it to be taken down was hauled before the student tribunal on charges of showing insufficient "respect for others".

All of this just makes the place feel even more creepy. I think back to the kids tittering about pretending to drink alcohol, about their soliloquies for Olin's greatness. *Friendly fascism* is the term that comes to mind.

It's getting late so I try to find Lex to give me a ride home, but we end up at the kegger party. Olin students insist they know how to party just like everyone else, but as you might expect, it's the weirdest party I've ever been too. The lights are turned down low and an iTunes visualizer is placed on the TV screen, as some kids try to awkwardly dance. But it's not dark or drunk enough for that, so instead the girls go around standing on tip toes and giving each other hugs while speaking in high-pitched voices, before going to get costumes to prance around in.

Finally they break open the keg (there is some humor at how the engineering students can't figure out how to operate it) but the root beer doesn't improve the scene much. I finally manage to find Lex and prevail upon her for a ride back to the train station and as we ride through the darkness she muses about Olin on the way home. I try to tell her what I feel, but it's clear she doesn't really want to hear it. To her Olin is a place of wonder; she wants validation, not refutation. I suppose my feedback is "too negative".

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October 10, 2006